

Sound Body, Fractured Mind by DarkShadows_EvilMind

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Attempted Murder, Dead Dove: Do Not Eat, Escapism, Eventual Fluff, Eventual Happy Ending, Gen, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault, It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better, Kidnapping, M/M, Mental Anguish, Murder, Physical Abuse, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Psychological Trauma, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Whump, Will Byers Loves Mike Wheeler, Will Byers Needs a Hug

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Summary:

On November 6th, Craig Crick was sent home early from work after coworkers reported him standing at the sink washing his hands until they were red and soaked with blood. On November 6th, Will Byers disappeared with only his overturned bike left behind.

Trapped in a madman's lair, Will descends into the deepest recesses of his imagination in a desperate attempt to escape what is happening to him. There's no man keeping him hostage—just a monster.

The Demogorgon... It got him. Now, his only hope is for his friends to save him before it's too late.

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Or, a retelling of Stranger Things only all the fantastical bits take place in the paracosm of Will's mind with the aid of his powerful imagination. Heed the tags. This will be a dark fic with Byler endgame. (Non explicit. Get your cheese pizza elsewhere.)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

As stated in the summary, this is a dark fic in which the events of Stranger Things (i.e. El et al) exist only within Will's mind as a coping mechanism for the horror he endures while abducted. I grew up on Stephen King (aka master of weird child orgies, stories in which a woman's breast is removed with a can opener, and a lesser known short about a boy who can no longer eat Red Vines because he was raped in the bushes after buying a pack) so keep that in mind. Dark fic but I will not go explicit into the non-con as 1) in Will's innocent perspective, he doesn't know what it is, and 2) not giving out cheese pizza. Child abduction is a real, horrifying issue and shouldn't be fetishized. (Save that for your consenting adult roleplays, folks! No judgment!)

I promise you will not be reading the transcript of Stranger Things Season 1, but with that being said, this story assumes all of it happened within Will's imagination. (Does anyone else get the allegory of child sexual abuse when they watch that show or is it just me? 3 legged papa drawing? I felt it / everywhere/? C'mon now.)

Also, as stated in the summary, Byler is endgame. Keep that in mind!

Thank you for coming to my TED Talk. Proceed & Thanks for dropping by!

Craig Crick stood scrubbing the rust off his hands at the metal trough outside the cafeteria in the automotive factory where he spent thirteen scorching hours each night. The large steel basin had a lever underneath it that he was pressing down with one greasy, rust-covered boot to make the jets of water spray out over his calloused hands. The soap was a green, noxious-smelling mix of industrial de-

greaser with some kind of crushed up pellet in it to help scrape off the filth. The black grease from the metal they all worked with was known to cause rashes, blisters... One bitch who never should have been hired in the first place had to quit because she was allergic to the shit.

Craig thought of her as he scrubbed and scrubbed at the rust and grime, picturing her reddened face and the speckle of hives running up both her arms to her neck. Served her right, Craig thought. Shouldn't have been doing man's work to begin with.

"Christ, Crick! Did you get your hand stuck on one of the blades?" It was one of the damned wetbacks the plant had started hiring, Fernando Something-tez. Everyone in the plant just called him Speedy Gonzales. Not because he was fast in his work, but because he was short and brown and was always quick to run his damned mouth. Probably made more an hour than any of the legal employees. That is to say, he was the last person Craig wanted bothering him.

"Bitch had it comin'," Craig said, glaring down at the brownish swirl of rust, black grease, and gray foam from the soap as it whirled around the drain.

"What's that?"

Craig didn't care to repeat himself. If the man didn't speak English, he could get back to where the hell he came from.

Speedy took the hint and washed his hands in the trough silently before making his way into the cafeteria.

Bitch had it comin', Craig thought to himself, scrubbing his aching, burning hands. *The bitch had it comin'*.

He showed her though. And he'd finish showing her once he got out of this hell hole. He was late and had somehow missed the supervisor, a scrawny little asshole named Sherman Holt, on his way in. Craig found his machine idle and cold when he got there, meaning there'd be hell to pay once Holt found him. Apparently the first shifter didn't feel up to sticking around. Craig's bitch of a wife could

pay for that, too, when he got home.

He'd make her pay for all of it. Making him late, getting him written up, trying to take his son...

Oh, that bitch was going to be sorry she ever opened her pretty mouth to do more than suck cock. If he had his way...he'd burn her alive.

You're gonna take my son? Craig thought, feeling that same red-hot rage start boiling up again. *Never even touched the kid. Never did any worse than my old man did to me. She's tryna raise a bitch like her. That's what it is. Always wanted a daughter. Tryna make my boy into a little bitch like her.*

Oh, he'd show her. Oh, he was going to *show* her.

"Crick... You alright, man?" Speedy again.

"Ain't nobody taught you not to bother a man when he's busy?" Craig snapped, fixing the little man with a cold, hard glare—the kind that would usually send his bitch of a wife running. She knew not to fuck with him when he looked at her like that. Cooper did, too. Speedy was about to learn to do the same.

Only he wasn't running. His little, brown face was twisted up with concern. "Crick, you been standing here my whole break. What are you doing, man? Are you okay?" He leaned in then, whispering as best he could in the roar and hum of the factory. "Do you need me to get someone for you?"

"Ah, mind your own business, would ya? Let a man wash his damned hands. What's the matter with you?" Craig yelled, pumping more soap into his hands. The grime wouldn't come off, no matter how hard he scrubbed, and the grease was starting to burn through his skin. He'd be damned if he stood here and burst into hives like that bitch who'd had to quit just 'cause Speedy felt like running his gums.

"Crick! Jesus, Crick. Come off it. Come off it." All Speedy's yapping had called the super over, and Holt jerked Craig back from the trough, leaving him with wet, stinging, rusty, soapy hands.

“I’m tryna clean up! I gotta take a piss. What’s the big deal?” Craig snapped.

Holt stared at him like a man who’d just witnessed a car wreck, only with less intrigue. He had the shock down, though. He sent Speedy on his way and grabbed a wad of shop towels for Craig and, to his horror, tried wrapping them around Craig’s rusty, soapy hands. He started asking about injuries, what had happened to him or to his machine, and then insisted on inspecting the press which showed no signs of damage.

“I told ya I didn’t fucking stick my hand in there! What do you think I am, some kind of fucking rookie, Holt? You think I don’t know how to do my damned job?”

Holt was stammering and scratching his head while Craig dabbed at his burning hands with the cloths. The fabric was sticking to his knuckles and peeling off with an incredibly sharp sting. Soap was probably eating through his skin is what it was. Holt dragged him away before he could get it all off. He was *trying* to ruin Craig’s hands! He was *trying* to get him fired! Fucker knew he made too much from being there too long and was trying to push him out!

Well, Craig might just have to show him, too.

“Listen... Crick, go home. I know these past couple weeks have been hard on you with Margaret and Cooper—”

Just hearing her name come out of that man’s mouth flipped a switch in Craig’s brain.

“Are you fucking my wife?” Craig snapped. How the hell did Holt know about that bitch trying to take his son? He was in on it, too. It was all a huge fucking conspiracy. First the fucking electrician she’d brought in without asking, and now his fucking boss? The whore was going to die tonight.

“Have you—Are you drinkin’ again? The hell is this!?” Holt argued, his face going from shocked to that irritating, know-it-all look that the bitch at home always got. Been around her too long, Craig thought. Fucker’s been around his wife so long he picked up on her

shitty mannerisms.

“Who gives a rat’s ass if I’ve been drinking? Are you fucking my wife?”

“Crick, go home. You’ve gotta stop this.” Holt dared to look angry, dared to throw his hand toward the long stretch of corridor that would lead to the entrance of the plant. Kicking him out? Holt was kicking him out!? All he wanted was to wash his damned hands!

“I’m not drinkin’! I ain’t going anywhere!” Fury was pumping in his veins more than blood. Rage and hate all swirling together with the gut-twisting humiliation of knowing his boss was also fucking his wife and all involved in their business.

Fucker probably had Cooper calling him *Dad*. This *fucker*.

He was where Cooper’s new Walkman came from, not some new rich friend he’d made at school. Yeah, Craig knew there were a few too many holes in that goddamned story.

Craig was seeing his son’s lying, little face in front of him more than he was Holt. Cooper might just have to pay a second time, too. How dare he keep secrets like this? How dare he cover the bitch’s back!?

“Go home! I’ll call you in the morning! We’ll deal with this when you’ve dried out!”

Craig found himself in his truck, fuming behind the steering wheel which he pounded with his rust-covered hands—imagining it was Holt’s face, then his wife’s. A time or two, he envisioned that punch going toward Cooper, his son. None of this would’ve happened if it weren’t for him.

He just had to go running his mouth and getting the bitch worked up... Craig told him a million and one fucking times to keep his mouth closed and he just couldn’t listen. Took too much after his mom, and both of them were committed to ruining him.

Craig punched the wheel, envisioning Cooper’s face—those huge, doe eyes staring at him. He looked so much like a little fucking girl sometimes and Craig fucking hated him for it. He had lips just like

his mother's. Lips that ran red with blood.

He felt the skin of his knuckles split as he punched the steering wheel a final time, an image flashing through his brain of split, blackened lips and puffy, bruised eyes swollen damned near shut. Skin gray.

Craig let out a yelp and his eyes snapped open, the image getting chased away by the sea of cars in the dark parking lot. *Goddamn* he was losing money over this shit getting sent home early like this. A lot of money...

It was a forty minute drive from Perry Automotive back to Hawkins, and the only thing Craig passed on the way were deer and a few of their bloated, mangled corpses along the road. Another image flashed in his head and he found himself crying out, his truck swerving as he shook his head to banish the gory sight.

Margie laying in a heap, head split open and brains pouring out.

I didn't mean to hurt the bitch.

Craig's head came back around just as he was about to drive his truck off into the ditch, but it was all a moment too late. He saw a bike and body go tumbling off into the inky black woods and stomped on his brakes. For a moment, he couldn't remember if he'd felt the bang of an impact, metal bike meeting metal bumper, or not. For a moment, he thought there was brain matter spattered across his windshield, but once he'd screeched to a sideways halt in the middle of the deserted road, he realized the glass was clean except for the brain matter of plenty of bugs.

A kid, he thought. He'd just about hit a kid.

Craig swore and unfastened his seat belt, hands stinging and burning as he shoved open the door and spilled out onto the pavement. He slammed into it shoulder first and cracked his head something good on the road and laid there a moment before he could get his legs underneath him. Once he'd staggered onto his unsteady feet, Craig limped toward the woods where he could see the headlamp from the bike glowing down in the small ravine. It cast long shadows of the dark grass and fallen limbs around it, and lit up the shaking form a

kid in a bright red coat.

Had to be a kid—it was too small to be a man.

“Are you alright?” Craig called. “Hey, kid! You alright?” His feet threatened to slip out from under him as he made his way down into the ravine toward the fallen child and his bike, its tire still spinning.

Cooper had a bike like that.

But this kid was a lot smaller than Cooper. Maybe nine or ten instead of in his early teens.

But his hair was cut like Coop’s.

For a second, Craig’s vision was like one of those books with the moving pictures. You flipped back and forth between the two sheets and they made a bird look like it was in a cage or a man look like he was jumping. Only Craig could see his son and then some other boy’s clothes on him, cowering there on the ground by the trees.

“You alright?” Craig asked again, stumbling closer to the kid who hadn’t moved. Maybe he *had* hit him with his truck. Or clipped him at least. “Kid?”

“I’m—I’m okay,” the boy answered, his voice shaking. It was dark down there in the trees, and the lamp on the kid’s bike made things orange and hazy and strange—and the distant street lights didn’t help. Craig peered at him, squinting hard to make out what features he could.

The harder he looked though, the more he began to realize it *was* his fucking son. How the hell he’d ended up on this side of town, Craig didn’t know and frankly didn’t care. There was a curfew in their house, especially on school nights, and he knew better than to be out riding his bike on these streets after dark.

“What do you think you’re doing out here!?” Craig snapped, finding his footing a little more as he stomped toward Cooper. The boy backed away a step, face going wide like he didn’t understand what he’d done wrong.

“Um... S-Sir?” Cooper drew back with every step Craig took toward him. His lip wasn’t bloody and his eyes weren’t bruised, so all the pain Craig had spent his day feeling guilty for causing was just a sham. Some trick. So fucking twisted game set up by his wife to make him feel ashamed.

“Come here!” Craig boomed, wrath consuming him as his son backed away another step. He was twitching and shaking with fear, but still being defiant. Craig thought for sure he’d whipped that defiance out of Cooper a long time ago, but he apparently needed a refresher. “I said come here! Oh, buddy, you forget what happens when you make me ask *twice!*?”

Apparently the memory was stale but somehow still fresh enough that it made Cooper turn and bolt. He jerked back just before Craig’s hand seized the collar of his red jacket and began sprinting off into the dark woods, leaving his bike behind like the spoiled, selfish shit he was. Craig hoped he didn’t think he’d ever be seeing that bike again!

Craig raced after him, spotting flashes of yellow and red through the trees—hearing the rustling of the windbreaker-like fabric along with the crunch of leaves.

Whose jacket *was* that and where were Cooper’s clothes? What was his son doing in some other boy’s clothes!? Did *Holt* buy it for him!? Not knowing made him even angrier as he gave chase.

His son ran toward some little shack of house off of a long, gravel driveway. The lights were off and Craig didn’t recognize the place, but he knew well enough that if his son went pounding away on some stranger’s door, it was trouble for all of them. He just ran so *fast*. Clearly the ass-beating he’d gotten two days before hadn’t been as bad as he’d acted or he wouldn’t be able to move that quick.

Craig would just have to see about doing better this time.

Cooper, from the looks of it, pounded on the door and got in—either because the homeowner opened up or he found it unlocked. Either way, Craig didn’t like it. He stopped to catch his breath, seething as he stared at the house. It was still pitch dark and no lights came on...

His son just broke into a stranger's house in front of him and was probably terrorizing some poor old woman. He was gonna get the cops called, and if he thought *that* was going to spare him a tanned hide, he was out of his goddamned mind.

In the distance, Craig could hear a dog barking. If there was a dog in that house, it was going to rip his son limb from fucking limb and Craig did *not* feel like paying those hospital bills.

"About as crazy and stupid as his bitch of a mother," Craig grumbled, approaching the house where the sound of the dog had definitely come from. He was still breathing heavily, not sure if from the exertion or the hate. He tried the front door and found it locked, so he started making his way around the house only to see his son's face in one of the windows peering out at him, widening in fear when he realized he was caught.

Why didn't the damned dog get him? It was a thought that crossed Craig's mind but couldn't really stick. Not with how defiant Cooper was being right to his face.

"Get out here! Cooper! Get out here, *right now!*"

Cooper's face vanished from the window and Craig rushed back to the front door, pounding on it with his fist before the haze of red wrath had him kicking it with all of his force until he felt the door frame splintering. Whoever's house this was, he'd pay for it. He was doing them a favor dragging his son out of it since their guard dog wasn't worth a shit.

He made it inside just in time to hear another door thrown open—a back door. He rushed through the house without seeing it and chased his son toward a shed in the backyard. There was a mongrel yapping at him and Craig felt a sharp pain shooting up his leg that dropped him to the ground. He could hear snarling and ripping as he watched his son disappear into the dark shed.

There was a fucking dog ripping at him instead of the real intruder and Craig, in a flash, had kicked it hard in its teeth. He heard it yelp and back off, but he wasn't done with it. Not by a long shot. It's cries reminded him of the noises Margie had made when he'd swung down

the hammer—

When he reached the shed, his son stood there with an air riffle pointed at him. His face was pale and his eyes were wide and full of terror under the bright, naked bulb glowing over head.

“Put that shit down,” Craig snarled at the boy.

His tiny chest was heaving, but he didn’t move. He seemed...frozen. Frozen just a pace or two away. His finger was on the trigger but he was swaying a bit on his feet—the fight trickling out of him, maybe. The adrenaline wearing off and leaving him nauseated and weak.

Craig charged him and cracked the boy across the cheek as hard as he could, all before his son could get his fingers to work on the trigger. He and the gun both went spilling onto the floor and Craig grabbed him back up by the collar of his jacket.

It was a fight to get him the first few steps out of the shed, and Craig had to smack the boy a few more times to get him to behave and finally start to walk with him. Cooper was sobbing like a pathetic baby by that point, shaking from head to toe as he was dragged back through the trees up to the truck that was still running. He tried to start struggling again as he was being pushed into the passenger seat, probably realizing how blistered his ass was about to be once he got home, but he took a fist between the eyes and slumped backwards—finally malleable enough to shove into his seat.

Craig could’ve sworn he’d taught Cooper better just a day or two before. He could’ve sworn he taught the boy to be obedient—to *listen*. It was all too clear the message hadn’t sunk in. He’d have to do better... Craig would just have to do better. His old man was probably watching him from Hell, cackling at him for having such a poor grasp on the situation. Couldn’t keep his wife in line, couldn’t keep his son in line... The old man laughed and laughed and Craig’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. He imagined it was Cooper’s throat he was squeezing. Then Margaret’s. It was her fault for all of this anyway.

Cooper started whimpering and coming around just as the truck bounced over the potholes into their driveway. When his eyes

opened, he took in a sharp breath and started twisting his head all around, trying to see where he was before his eyes landed on Craig.

“Wh-Where am I?” He asked.

“One guess,” Craig growled. He’d had enough of Cooper’s shit. He was acting more and more like his mother each day, and starting to look like her, too. In certain light, Craig could practically see her face staring back at him as his son gaped at him.

As the house drew nearer, his son turned to look back out the windshield at it before his hand darted out for the door handle. The little shit almost had it open, but Craig’s hand seized him by the collar of his jacket again—and then by his ear when he tried taking off the coat to get away from him.

“Oh, you’re asking for it tonight, Coop. You’re *beggin’*.”

“I-I’m not C-Cooper. M-My name is W-Will Byers!” His son stammered, as if he thought his father was stupid enough to fall for it. He may have on someone else’s clothes, but this little runaway attempt wasn’t going to work on his own father.

“Keep talkin’ and I’ll just make it worse for ya.”

“P-Please! Please, Sir. I-I’m... I’m—Ow!”

Craig silenced him by twisting Cooper’s ear as hard as he could and yanking him close across the center console. He had his head pinned there, not letting up no matter how shrill or loud the cries got. He held tight until the truck was parked. When he let go, Cooper straightened up in his seat and rubbed his ear, crying like a five-year-old. Craig shut off the truck and took the key from the ignition, and in that time his son got the bright idea to throw the passenger door open and try to run. Only the truck was lifted too high for him and he rolled his ankle or something and collapsed into the dirt with a choked wail.

“Goddamnit!” Craig got out of the truck and slammed the door as hard as he could before coming around to the passenger side. Cooper was on his hands and knees, trying to get up—probably planning to

run. The wrath Craig had felt when he chased him the first time came back tenfold and he channeled it into the swift kick he delivered to Cooper's gut. One blow and he was curled into a ball and easily dragged up onto his feet by Craig's grip on his wrist.

Still, the fight hadn't left him and Cooper squirmed in Craig's grasp as he was dragged into their house. Craig threw him to the floor and kicked him again, catching his leg this time. He slammed their door shut and locked it. The place reeked to high heavens, and Margaret was nowhere to be found. Typical. Cunt was probably out with her lips stretched around Holt's cock under his desk at the plant.

That was fine. Since Cooper was itching for discipline so bad, he could pay for her sins, too.

Craig kicked him in the stomach again when Cooper wobbled back onto his hands and knees, just to see him sprawl back down on the hardwood floor. He banged his head pretty good and was whimpering like a little baby as he curled into a ball.

"Do you think you're funny? Runnin' off on me and your mother like that? Not so funny now, is it?" Craig's hands were throbbing and so was his right foot. When he looked down, his hands were bloody and the leg of his pants was torn and streaked with blood as well from that damned dog. The longer he looked at them, the more they throbbed with pain.

He didn't wash that grease off well enough at work...

"I asked you a question!" Craig shouted, the pain fueling his anger even more. He wouldn't be hurt at all if it weren't for Margaret, and if she wasn't here to take her beating, Cooper was going to have to take it for her. "Did you forget what happens when I ask twice!? Did you *forget* what *happens* when I ask *twice*!?"

All his son seemed capable of doing was shivering and crying, infuriating Craig even more. He was hugging himself around the chest and choking out little sobs like he was five-fucking-years old, snot running all over his damned face. He even looked like a fucking baby that way—not at all like a boy of fourteen.

What was worse, was it had become apparent by the small puddle forming on Craig's wood floor that the boy had pissed himself, too. Of all the sick, disgusting things to do to piss him off, this took the damned cake. Did Cooper really think something *that* disgusting would spare him a beating?

"Get up! Get your ass up right now! You're cleaning this mess! You are *cleaning* this fucking *mess*!"

His son acted like he didn't know where the dishrags were once Craig had pulled him back onto his feet, admittedly hunched over from how much his stomach probably hurt from the kicks. Nothing near as bad as Craig's leg though, and he was sure to learn it, too. Cooper was in for a world of hurt, and without his mother here to get in the way, it could very well go all night. School was in session, Craig thought to himself with a chuckle, and Cooper was going to fucking learn real good.

He made Cooper mop up the puddle of piss, then put the rags in the laundry room—Craig's hand fisted in the collar of his red coat to keep him moving. Once they were deposited in the bin, Cooper stood there with his head low, arms crossed over his chest and shaking. The soaked front of his jeans probably had him chilled to the bone and Craig thought that would do just fine. Let him stand there and *think about* the consequences of his actions. Let him really stew in it.

That thought had Craig chuckling, too, and his laughter only served to extract a new course of sobs from his son. He wouldn't look Craig in the eye, and his big brown eyes were staring off at the floor—wide and shiny wet with tears. His lips were shiny with spit and snot, some of it dripping off his chin. Such a pretty sight, Craig thought. It looked like his lesson was finally starting to get through to the boy.

"Oh, come on. You know what Grandpa would've done to me if I wet myself like a baby at your age?"

"No," Cooper cried, his voice tiny and meek, finally seeming to learn not to make his father ask twice.

"I guess I oughtta show you then, huh?" Craig wouldn't have dared piss himself at fourteen, but he had a pretty good idea of what might

happen if he did—beyond the royal ass-whipping his kid was already about to get. And, if it weren't even something his father would've done to him, it would still get the message across.

Yes, it surely would.

() () ()

The Demogorgon... It got me.

It was all Will could think. Over and over and over.

The Demogorgon. It got me... It got me... It got me.

His whole body was shaking and wracked with sobs, even though he was desperately trying to choke them down in hopes the man—the monster—would stop hurting him. His left ear was burning hot from where it had been grabbed and twisted. His ribs ached and his stomach was experiencing such sharp pangs after being kicked there so many times that he was scared his stomach acid might be pouring all through his insides. Mr. Clarke said stomach acid could dissolve almost anything... Right? So what if it was dissolving him from the inside out?

Thoughts like that only made him cry harder. He was so scared—beyond scared. His body didn't even seem to respond to him anymore. His bladder had given out on him, his lungs were burning from his sobs, his throat aching from his screams...

And now he found himself being yanked back out into the cold. His legs shook so much he almost fell time and again even before being pulled down the steps into the dark back yard of the isolated farm house. The November air lashed at him, freezing the front of his soaked jeans to the point it hurt within a matter of seconds.

He wanted to ask where they were going, what the man was doing—what the man was going to do to him out here—but the words wouldn't come. He just shuddered and sobbed as he was dragged along the side of the house by the collar of his coat.

Every part of his brain screamed at him to run, to twist free and run, but he was so *cold*. He couldn't move. He didn't want to try yanking

away only to have his ear pulled again. Maybe... Maybe if he listened, the man would stop.

Maybe he was like Dad... If you just did what he said, he eventually stopped. And then...then Mom would come and it'd all be better. Only Mom wasn't *here*. How was Mom going to find him if the man didn't let him go? Will just wanted his Mom.

He should try to run again, Will realized. He really needed to try to run again, because the man was twisting a garden hose into the spigot on the side of the farmhouse and it didn't take a genius to figure out what he was going to do.

Run... Run! *Run!* Why couldn't he move!?

Will stood there staring at the man and crying as the hose turned on and he took a full blast of icy water to his bare neck. The shock of it caused him to stumble backwards and he fell, the man's grip no longer on his collar.

Run!

Except he couldn't. The water was sprayed over him—every inch of him—and the icy cold had him petrified. His skin screamed in agony and his clothes began to feel heavier than concrete. In a matter of seconds, he was just...locked in place. He couldn't move from where he'd fallen as the water was sprayed all over him—his face, his hands, his legs. His shoes were soaking wet and his toes felt like tiny ice cubes, curled up against the soles of his feet as much as they could.

Whenever he tried to curl himself up to protect his face or his core, the man who kept calling himself Will's father—and kept calling Will Cooper—would grab him by his wet hair and yank his head back and spray him directly in the face. Some of the water got in his mouth. Some went up his nose.

Not even an hour before and he'd been safe and warm, playing Dungeons & Dragons with Mike and his friends... He'd been so *warm*. Will didn't think he'd ever be warm again.

He wanted to run, but the moment the water saturated his clothes, his joints turned to ice. He couldn't *move*. He was shaking so hard he was afraid his teeth might chip from the chattering, even as the hose was turned off. The man stood there heaving, breaths coming out like a snarl. Steam was rising off of him in the cold...

The man was steaming like he was on fire...

Will stared at him, no longer sobbing—just shaking and chattering. His fingers were numb. His feet... He couldn't feel them anymore. Everything hurt. It wasn't even cold. It just *hurt*.

The man was snarling at him and Will really hoped he wasn't asking any questions, because Will couldn't hear him. It didn't even sound like *words*. It sounded like an animal chattering at him, growling at him.

He let out a desperate, fearful cry as the man grabbed him by his soaked vest and pulled him up to his feet—or tried to. Will's legs couldn't support him. He couldn't feel them. He stumbled and collapsed and fell over and over as the man got angrier and more violent with him until he was finally picked up and carried into the reeking house.

It smelled like a carcass.

It smelled like the dead deer he biked past sometimes before the road crews came and took them away.

He'd never smelled anything like that in a *house*.

Will was set almost gently back onto the floor as the man slammed the door shut and locked it. Even inside, he didn't feel any warmer. His clothes and his hair were dripping on the hardwood floors, the spatters getting louder whenever his body would surge from a tremor.

"Get those clothes off. You're gonna catch your fuckin' death." The man was staring down at him, his scratched up face holding no emotion. His eyes just looked dead... His hands were bloody and raw and his leg was bleeding from where Chester had bitten him.

He was bigger than Dad. He was bigger than Mr. Clarke and Mr. Wheeler... He was a giant and Will knew he should listen to what he said—but he was frozen. His hands couldn't unfurl themselves, even when he tried to make them.

"Yeah, keep making me ask twice. It's gonna end real good for ya."

Will let out a shaky cry as the man descended on him, yanking his vest off after tugging and tugging and ripping because he didn't seem to see or understand the zipper. Then it was Will's flannel—buttons scattering across the floor. Then his white thermal yanked off over his head. His cheek was slapped as soon as the shirt was off and he was being yelled at for not cooperating. The explosion of pain somehow felt ten times worse as the feeling had started creeping back into his skin.

His shoes were ripped off his feet and thrown, and Will began to whimper as the man's cracked, bloodied hands started digging at the fly of his jeans. Will tried to push against them, but his fingers could barely rise from his palms and he was shaking too hard to put much force behind his actions. He could do nothing but sit there as this stranger undressed him, calling him by the wrong name the whole time.

By the time white briefs were dragged down his legs, Will no longer felt the hot hands trailing over his skin. He was throbbing from the pain of his limbs warming back up and trying not to look at the parts of him the man was touching. He was trying to rub feeling back into Will's hands, then his feet... Then other places, too. Places Will didn't want him to touch but was too scared to move to make him stop.

"What did you do to yourself?" The man asked. Will didn't know what he meant and sobbed because he couldn't answer. He didn't want to make him ask twice, but he couldn't answer. The touch didn't hurt, but Will still wanted his hand to move—to touch someplace else, anywhere else. Why was he touching *there*!? What did he *mean*!?

The man grumbled something and pulled back. Will glanced up at him again, afraid to let him out of his line of sight. If he left the room, could he make a break for the door? His feet still hurt, but he

could move them. If he left, could Will run? Even naked? Out into the cold until he found somewhere to hide?

Only the man wasn't leaving the room. He was undoing his belt.

"Fuckin' told you not to make me ask twice. You've had this comin' all damned day. *All* damned day." He sounded so calm... His face was a dead, blank, black hole even as he reached down and grabbed Will by his wrist in a crushing grip. He dragged him up by his arm and started pulling him toward the kitchen counter. Will grasped for it to keep from falling back onto the floor, maybe to keep from having his nose crack against it as he tumbled.

Will didn't even have time to really straighten himself up before he felt an agonizing, sharp blow explode across his back. It knocked the air from his lungs and he doubled over the counter top, wheezing. He didn't get the chance to take in another breath before the second blow came.

His dad had hit him with the belt one time in his whole life, almost two years ago, and he'd thought it was the worst pain he'd ever felt—even after he'd broken his finger falling off his bike a year later, the memory of the belt was still worse. Only now, that one punishment paled in comparison to what the man was doing.

Bullies had tripped him and kicked him before, but none of them were even half as strong as the...the Demogorgon.

He wasn't a person, Will thought as more and more blows trailed lower and lower down his body. If he started to collapse to his knees, the man grabbed him by his abused ear and dragged him right back up until Will was clutched at the flat counter top to keep from falling again. If he tried getting away, the monster roared at him and dragged him back into place by his hair. He could feel his skin splitting wherever the belt slashed against it. Sobs ripped from his throat after each, turning into loud wails and desperate moans. Nothing made it stop. Fighting made it worse and holding still didn't make the blows fall any lighter like with Dad. It got worse and worse and worse.

This wasn't a person—or at least wasn't one anymore. It was a

monster. A *monster*!

The Demogorgon, Will thought. It got me... It got me, it got me, it got me.

He might've even said it out loud, or screamed it, as the sharp strikes from the belt centered on his bottom and didn't let up. Will scratched at the counter top as his legs gave out only to have himself being pinned by his head—no. Having his head *crushed* against the counter to keep him where the monster wanted.

Monster.

It was a monster.

He wanted his mother. He wanted Mom. He wanted Mom to come and save him, to banish this monster like it was just one of his bad dreams. Monsters weren't real, she'd told him. Monsters weren't real, but they had to be—because otherwise this didn't make *sense*.

There was no man growling over top of him.

It was a monster that stood eight feet tall with long, terrifying arms, and a terrifying black hole full of razor-sharp teeth for a face—a black hole that extended deep into another world, like the portal that opened up in the closet in *Poltergeist*. It was *just* like that, Will realized. Eight feet tall, black hole for a face, terrifyingly long arms and long, probing fingers that ended in sharp claws.

Long, sharp claws that dug and dug and dug away into his body while his head remained crushed against the counter. His screams had turned to sad, pitiful groans that he could barely hear over the monster's snarls. Mom wasn't coming...

Mom wasn't coming to save him.

The Demogorgon... It took him with it to another plane where she couldn't see him let alone find him.

Will's whole body was an aching, throbbing wound as he was finally freed by the monster—flesh torn and seeping blood both inside and out. He collapsed onto his knees on the floor, shaking as his fingers

still gripped the edge of the counter over his head. In his mind, he was seeing that terrifying, deep maw from *Poltergeist*, trying to swallow the mom and little girl whole. He could hear that woman speaking in her tiny, strange voice, “It is...The Beast.”

The Demogorgon... It punched its way into their world from the Vale of Shadows and now it had taken him back with it.

Will whined as he felt the monster grab him up by his armpits, forcing him onto his feet. It was trilling at him, making guttural, feral noises that Will couldn’t comprehend—speaking from it’s large, endless mouth. No eyes. No nose... Just a terrifying black hole. It started shaking him, and then dragging him. It was taking him back to its lair in a pit beneath the farmhouse. Down the dark, creaky steps into the black, reeking horror underneath the floorboards.

He tumbled from the last wooden board—not sure if he fell or was pushed. The monster cackled something at him, something that sounded like “There. There, now you can be with your mother.” Only angrier, and more vicious. Will realized he was laying on the ground, his vision staticy from his head hitting the stone floor of the cavern.

I’m in his basement, Will thought, only for the idea to be wiped away. Not a basement, a lair. Because Demogorgons didn’t have basements. They didn’t have houses or wives or sons named Cooper. He was in a cave deep beneath the earth, naked and bleeding and sore and cold. So, so cold.

The lair reeked even worse than the land above, smelling of rot and decay. It was dark and he lay there, curled in on himself, listening to the noises above him while trying not to vomit from the stench. The monster had retreated for now, but it wasn’t done with him. Will didn’t know how long he lay there on the stone floor, but his eyes began adjusting to the darkness. Something he wished they really hadn’t done.

There was a body hanging upside down from the ceiling.

He felt a jolt of pure terror rocket through him at the sight and Will was once again snapped back into his flesh and bone—gone from wherever his imagination had floated off to. It was almost like

waking up from a nightmare, only awake was worse.

Long, stringy hair dangled down toward the floor where there was a spattered mass of something...some pile of something right beneath its head. Next to it was another body.

Cooper...

Mother...

Will would've screamed if he could get air into his lungs. It wouldn't do him any good, but the terror gripped him so forcefully that he tried. Maybe, somehow, his mom would hear him and come save him. He didn't want to end up like that, suspended upside down in some man's basement—

Some monster's lair, he corrected himself. People didn't do this. Monsters did.

The Demogorgon... It got him.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Heads up, use of racial slur in this chapter because Craig is a piece of shit. But I think you already know that since he did the same thing last chapter.

Mom was probably up looking for her keys. She'd find them in the couch. That's where she always lost them. Jonathan would be making breakfast. He always got up early to listen to his favorite radio show. They probably didn't notice he was gone when they got home.

The monster didn't leave evidence.

Will remembered the terror of being chased by the creature, how it had used its mind to unlock the door and scrambled the phone lines when he tried to call 911—how it had manifested in the shed, immune to his bullets.

Yeah, Will remembered trying to call 911 after making it inside and...no one answered. He didn't forget in his panic. He *called*. It just didn't work. It wasn't his fault he got caught because...because the monster messed with the phone lines and appeared and disappeared on a whim. Will hadn't stood a chance.

Now he was trapped in its lair, where the air was so toxic and contaminated it made his throat and eyes burn. You'd need a space suit to survive the atmosphere.

Mom would check to make sure he was up for school...and he would be gone. She'd be scared. She'd be worried. He didn't mean to make her worried... But she would just think he was still at Mike's probably. Especially since he'd lost his bike in the woods. She'd call and then...

Then he'd find out he wasn't there either. Sometimes he went to school early, but not without telling anyone. Usually Jonathan because he was up and out of the shower while Mom was still crawling out of bed, tired from the doubles she always pulled at

work. It'd been like that since Dad left... Mom was always working, and now Jonathan was, too. Like last night...

Mom would realize he was missing and then—

There was a thud from somewhere overhead and Will's eyes snapped open. He'd kept them shut ever since he'd awoken—feverish and shaking. Daylight filtered in through the slits of the basement windows and he could see the woman hanging upside down—body black, bloated, spilling....

One glimpse was enough. He kept his eyes shut, and now was seeing even more of it—and the body next to hers, hanging all the same.

The noise came again and Will scurried alongside the stone wall, slinking as quietly as he could—biting his lip to hold in the cries of pain. He was bloody all over but tried not to look. He was naked and chilled to the core, with sore feet and shaky hands. Thirsty, he realized, as he slipped himself into the space beneath the basement stairs. They were the kind of steps with no backs, so you could see through them like slats in mini blinds if you stood behind them. There was a shelf back there along the wall full of paint cans and tins and tools. But the bottom shelf was mostly empty and a large, red tool chest stood in front of it, one like Will's dad had in his garage.

Would they think his Dad took him when they couldn't find him at school?

Will shoved himself into the tiny space on the bottom shelf behind the tool chest, scraping his knee open as he did. He made sure to go in feet first so he could keep a look out but sink back into himself behind the tool chest if he had to.

More noise sounded upstairs and Will kept his eyes squeezed shut as he listened. They were growing louder as the monster moved overhead. It was only a matter of time before it came down to feast on him again.

But it'd have to find him first. And if he stayed really quiet and really still, it might think he escaped and leave—and leave the door open.

Will took in a shaking breath, tasting the rot on his tongue, as he heard the doorknob rattle and then heavy footsteps on the stairs. He counted them without meaning to—thirteen steps into the Vale of Shadows where its victims were suspended Upside Down.

The monster was quiet and still, just standing at the bottom of the steps—not even looking around. Will peered at it, holding his breath and hoping his heartbeat wasn't so loud it would attract its attention. So far, it just seemed to be staring at the bodies.

It just...stood there. Minutes ticked by like hours and Will suddenly realized the thing was rocking back and forth in time with the bodies suspended there. Swaying on a breeze Will couldn't hear or feel.

Will pulled his head back behind the chest and shut his eyes. What was happening? Why was it doing that? Why was it *doing that*?

There was a cacophony of horrible sounds and then a wet, crackling thud. Will could smell the rot so much more after that and he felt his stomach lurch. Burning, sour vomit filled his mouth and he forced himself to gulp it back down—squeezing his eyes shut as he did, tears leaking out from the horror, praying the monster didn't hear. He was already on the verge of sobbing again, knowing that doing so would attract the monster's attention, and his stomach was clenching painfully and twisting as he desperately held his breath in hopes he wouldn't get sick again.

The monster was saying something—

No, just making noise. It sounded like it was crying, but then it sounded like it was kicking that poor, mangled corpse again and again until a loud ringing sound filled the space upstairs—like a phone ringing. The monster twisted around and then began stomping up the stairs. Will didn't dare come out of hiding to follow. He lay on the wooden shelf trembling behind the tool chest, trying to think of anything else—anywhere else.

What would Mike say when he got to school and Will wasn't there? Would his friends just think he was skipping or would they realize he was missing? That he was in danger? Would they look for him?

Will found himself crying freely as he heard the monster roaring up above. His friends would know something was wrong. Mike would tell Dustin and Lucas that they had to find him, but they wouldn't be allowed. He bet their parents kept them safe inside.

The monster roared on and on, and Will could hear stomping and smashing.

The cops would probably pull his friends aside to ask about him, like on TV. When was the last time they saw him? What was he wearing? Did he seem upset like he wanted to run away from home?

Will could practically hear his friends bickering, he could see...Mike. When Will squeezed his eyes shut as hard as he could, he could see Mike sitting between Dustin and Lucas would would be arguing over something small and insignificant. Mike's eyes would look annoyed and frustrated like always. His lips would be pursed into a pout. Unless they were playing D&D in his basement, Mike always looked so serious. Always in control. Confident. He was confident. The Demogorgon wouldn't have caught him...

He wondered if it'd be Chief Hopper who talked to his friends. Or Hopper and a couple of the deputies. Will remembered Hopper from the time his parents' fighting got the cops called, their voices apparently carrying so far the neighbors all the way across the lot had heard. His dad and the chief got in a fight, and his dad kept screaming about Hopper being a pig, about Hopper trying to swoop in and be the hero after all these years. Will had a feeling Hopper and his mom used to be friends a long time ago...

He bet Hopper would be the one to talk to his friends—and Mike would say they'd help look for him and Hopper would say no. He was a cop, right? So he'd want them to stay home and stay safe. Especially since Will remembered hearing something whispered about Hopper's own child (a daughter, maybe?) passing away as a little baby. Yeah, he'd definitely want Mike and the others to stay safe.

But Mike wouldn't listen. Mike had a way of finding creative ways to get around roadblocks and rules. Jonathan and Mom had said more than once that Mike was his "spoiled" friend. Dad called him the

Spoiled Rich Kid. Mike didn't really think rules applied to him and never really seemed to have consequences when he got caught breaking them. (He'd definitely never felt the splitting pain of the belt, that was for sure.) Will, after growing up with his dad around, knew better than to break any rules. Sometimes he drew or read with a flashlight under the covers, though. His mind was sometimes just too active to let him sleep...

Maybe he deserved to get caught by the monster because he couldn't follow simple rules. Maybe it wasn't the Demogorgon, but the Boogie Man.

Will shivered at the thought, trying to banish it. He wanted to be somewhere else. He wanted to think of anything else. He wanted to think about...Mike. His best friend. Even if he wasn't *Mike's* best friend, Mike was his. His favorite friend...

Mike was smart and cunning. He'd find him. Mike would find him and pull off a daring rescue. He would... He would. Will bet that by this time tomorrow, he'd be safe and warm at home—and his mom would have just the right things to make all the pain go away. Mom always knew what to do when he hurt, even if he'd never hurt quite as much as this. She'd have something. Mom would have something, and if she didn't then she'd take him to the hospital and they would.

When he focused really hard, he could almost feel her arms around him—holding him to her chest, her chin resting on the top of his head. He never felt safer anywhere other than in her arms. Through every injury or ailment, if she found out about it, she always made it better again. She was the reason his dad only ever got to hit him with the belt once... And Dad never slapped him or shoved him the way he sometimes would Jonathan.

Will wondered sometimes why she protected him more so than Jon, but he didn't dare ask. Maybe it was because he was smaller... Or weaker. It was all too obvious that Jonathan was a stronger person than him. He wished either of them had been home to protect him last night.

He really wished they'd been home to help... He'd take back anything he'd ever said, anything bad he'd ever done, if it would've

made it so one of them had been home. He would skip breakfast every day if it saved enough money that his mom didn't have to work so much. He'd skip dinner, too.

Will's mind worked in exhausting circles as he laid there, his pains flaring up now and then until he was sniffing and crying quietly in his hiding place. His joints hurt and screamed to be stretched from where he was crammed into the pocket of the shelf behind the metal tool chest. He just couldn't risk moving, though. There was still a lot of noise upstairs and Will was waiting to see if the monster would go out to hunt again before he crawled out. If he was caught here, it was over.

He was so thirsty... So hungry. He really wished he'd taken Dustin up on that offer for the last slice of pizza before leaving Mike's place last night...

Maybe if he had, maybe if he'd just one small thing different, none of this would've happened.

How had any of this even happened?

() () ()

Something real funny was going on here...

Craig didn't like it. He couldn't find his wife and the school called to tell him Cooper wasn't in class. There was a horrid stench in the air that crawled all the way up the walls into his bedroom and every crack and crevice in the house. It came from the basement, and the only thing down there was a bunch of black mold... Looked like Cooper'd got a deer and got the wise idea to gut it in their basement instead of the garage. Probably figured it'd be warmer, not thinking about the mess.

Clearly he'd forgotten about it, too. The damned thing was full of rot.

Had to be a deer... No other animal was that kind of size or could give off that kind of a stink.

He was down there trying to figure out what he needed to do—what he *could* do—when the phone rang. Fucking Holt calling to tell him

he was on suspension. He had some cracked up excuse about Craig coming in drunk and getting hurt on the press, started spouting off that Craig was lucky they hadn't sent him in for a drug test at the hospital and fired him.

A week's suspension, no pay. Well, how the fuck was he supposed to pay his bills?

Craig made himself a pot of coffee and drank it with some dry, chewy toast.

It was all falling down around him and he could see it, clear as day. Margie stole his damned son and worked in cahoots with his boss to get him fired from work... She was trying to ruin his life, all because Cooper had to go and open his damned mouth. Kid didn't know what a secret was... Kid didn't understand jack shit about how the world worked.

Had to run his mouth. Had to go and run his mouth...

Well, Craig would catch him. And he'd catch the bitch. And he'd get Holt... And all of them were going to pay for it.

He'd start with the bitch first. Make it slow... Fuck her first, then bash that pretty face in a time or two before flipping her over and fucking her again.

His imagination was much more vivid today than usual. He could almost *hear* the screams. Must've been the good night's sleep he got. Bed was cold, but so much better without anyone hogging up all the blankets.

Craig played it out in his mind while staring at the same, red stain dripping off the kitchen counter to his floor. Looked an awful lot like blood... Cooper must've made a mess cleaning the deer.

But...there was something more to it. Craig couldn't put his finger on it. Something more. There was something more.

Something—

Someone was knocking on his damned door. Fucking solicitors, he

bet.

Craig hoisted himself up from the table and stalked toward the front door, shoving the lace curtain aside to peer out before unlocking it. A fuckin' pig. What was worse, it was a Nigger pig from the sheriff's office.

He growled to himself as he unlocked the door and swung it open to face the guy.

"Can I help you with something?" Craig asked, noticing the way the pig backed off a step. Knocked on the wrong goddamned door, buddy, Craig wanted to say.

"Yeah. I'm here about a missing kid—"

"Look, Cooper's only missed one goddamned day. Hardly think he needs the pigs chasin' after him. He'll get it good enough when he gets home. I can guarantee that. Don't need any help from the fuckin' cops handling my own son."

"Uh... With all due respect, I'm not here about your son," the cop said, eyes narrowing. He tipped his head, as if trying to see around Craig's shoulders into the house.

"Do you have a warrant?" Craig asked, moving to block him.

"Why? You got something you need to hide?"

"Does a man need a reason to not want pigs sniffin' around his shit?" Craig wanted little more than to grab this man by his head and crush it against the boulder he kept as a marker for his front drive.

"I can tell you right now, I don't want to sniff around more than I already am. What's that smell?"

"Cooper got a goddamned deer and tried to gut in my cellar. Little shit must've forgot what the hell he was doin'. Stunk up my whole damned house."

The cop's eyes narrowed a little more, but he didn't ask to see inside or to inspect the corpse. "Listen, I'm here about a missing boy. Will

Byers. Disappeared last night. Did you see anything? Anyone sniffing around your backyard?"

"Byers?" Some kid was missing, his wife and son were missing... What the hell was going on in this damned town.

"Yeah. Lonnie Byers' youngest." The pig started describing the boy, but Craig didn't hear him.

Cooper... Maybe Cooper wasn't off with his mom. Maybe the little queer went and ran off with that other boy.

Yeah, that would make sense. Boy was always hanging around people too young for him—so much of a loser the kids his own age didn't even bother with him. Coop and that kid probably run off together and Marge just happened to be huddled up under Holt's desk at the plant suckin' his dick—too busy to notice.

"I'll ask Marge and my boy when they get in. If anything happens in this town, Margie would know it. Bitch's involved with everybody."

"Well, when you see her, be sure to ask her. And your son, too." The cop started backing off and Craig nodded. He looked suspicious, though. Like he thought Craig had Lonnie's son locked away in his basement.

"You say there was a search party?" Craig asked. Looking concerned, like a good citizen, would keep the pig from sniffing around. Last thing Craig needed was the prick getting a warrant for the dead deer smell and finding his pot plants in the spare room instead, and then fining him up the ass if not sticking him in jail.

"Oh... Well, uh, suppose we're going to get one in order. Right now we're still going door to door. Checking Lonnie's place to see if he shows up. Nine times out of ten the kid's just skipping or with another parent."

"Sure," Craig said, nodding his head.

"Tell you what, I'll have Flo at the station give you a ring if we're getting one together. Every set of eyes helps."

“I suppose. Yeah, give me a call. I’m off work for a few nights anyways. Wouldn’t be no fun sittin’ at the bar if all the guys are just out combin’ the woods anyways.”

That seemed to put the cop at ease and he was on his way with the tip of his hat. Fuckin’ Nigger pig... As he walked, Craig envisioned himself crushing his head against that boulder.

()()()

Will awoke to the feeling of being yanked hard by his arm. The force of it was so great he felt both his wrist and his shoulder pop as he was dragged from the crevice behind the tool chest. There was screaming, too. The monster roaring at him as it began to shake him and shake him and shake him by his shoulders.

“Guilty!” It was screaming. “Guilty! You make me look guilty! YOU’RE MAKING ME GUILTY!”

His face was struck, again and again, until he tasted blood—until he felt it running down his chin.

“Why here!? Why did you come here!? Why!? WHY!?”

Will was grabbed by his ear again and pulled toward the steps. Both bodies were now on the ground and covered in a loud, thundering cluster of flies. He screamed, the image of a gaping face with a black, squirming mass of flies in its eye sockets, burned forever into his brain. The man twisted his ear harder and harder, squeezing it so hard Will feared it would split in half. He was pulled up the stairs, each step making him feel as if he were about to rip into pieces. More often than not, his legs or his shins banged into the wooden steps, his feet not given the chance to support him.

“Gotta hide... Gotta hide... Gotta hide ya...” The man was hissing the words over and over as he dragged Will around by his ear. They went from room to room, upstairs into a hallway that was bathed in rust-colored blood, and then back down to the kitchen.

When Will tried to claw at the man’s fingers, he was smacked maybe five or six times in the face—each one feeling like a punch and

culminating in a bloody nose—and then thrown against a closed door. The doorknob jabbed into his ribs and Will collapsed to the floor, curling in on himself as fast as he could. It didn't spare him any pain.

He was flipped onto his stomach and the leather belt was cracking down on him again, harder and harder and harder. Will screamed until his voice was raw, the loud snap of the belt against his skin louder than any noise he made. All of his wounds from the night before began to burn even worse—his shoulder blades and thighs feeling scalded as if by boiling water.

Demogorgon, he thought to himself. Demogorgon, Demogorgon. Over and over. It was trying to rip the flesh from his bones to eat it. It was going to eat him alive.

And even so, Will couldn't get away. He just lay there until the snapping noise stopped. The long fingers of the beast wove through his hair and dragged him up onto his knees, pulling him away from the door in front of which he'd fallen. Will was forced to shuffle around on his knees to get away from the door as the monster yanked it open. It was a utility closet—small and cramped with some shelves built on the walls holding spices alongside the metal breaker box. Will saw it in a flash, and was then sealed off in the darkness. No light bulb over head. No switch. Just pitch blackness with loud roaring and banging outside the door.

He was scared of the dark but more afraid of the monster screaming at him through the wood. Will pressed his bleeding back against the far wall, his knees folded against his heaving chest. It sounded like the Demogorgon was trying to break in to get him... But the Demogorgon was the one who put him here so why?

Why?

Why!?

Will curled up against the wall, hands over his ears with his eyes squeezed shut, even long after the banging had stopped.

He didn't want to be here! He didn't want to be here! He wanted his

mom and he wanted Jonathan. He wanted to go *home!* He wanted Mike and he wanted Lucas and Dustin. Will just wanted to go *home!*

As the monster continued to scream, Will began to feel himself slipping away. What if he wasn't here? What if he wasn't him? What if... What if he was stronger? Smarter? Fought back? But how... The monster was so large.

He'd need superpowers.

He'd need... He'd need superpowers.

Even Will the Wise wasn't strong enough to fight the Demogorgon. He'd need to be someone else.

The roars started fading outside the room, but Will hardly noticed. His eyes were shut and his ears were covered, and he was somewhere else. *Someone* else.

A monster? Where had it come from...

It came...from that big, dark building that stood fenced off in the woods. Will noticed it when he rode past on his bike sometimes, but he'd never paid it much mind. It was creepy and abandoned.

Or... Or maybe that was what they *wanted* him to think. It was a lab. It was a secret, government lab where they were trying to build space lasers or...or something. Only their experiments went too far and they opened a portal to the Vale of Shadows. Another dimension. Just like theirs but full of monsters.

They opened the portal and the Demogorgon crawled out. It escaped and it hunted him...

Will curled up on his side, his face pressed against the wall with his arms wrapped around his chest. He was cold. So, so cold... So thirsty. So hungry...

He wasn't awake nor was he exactly asleep, but Will saw just as vividly as if they were standing before him, a kid. A boy? Maybe... A girl? He didn't know. It didn't matter. All that mattered was they stood outside, barefoot in the woods. Cold. They were cold, just like

him, and thirsty and hungry.

They escaped from the lab because there were Bad Men there. Bad Men who hurt them... Bad Men who...used them.

Yeah, Will thought. That made sense. The lab made a person with superpowers. *They* opened the portal...they saw the monster and were so scared they escaped. They were a prisoner at the lab—a creature of good used by the forces of evil. Yeah... Yeah, that made sense.

Cold and hungry and alone for the first time ever...

Burgers, Will thought. He'd really like a burger. Juicy. With tomatoes and lettuce. Water. French fries.

He couldn't have those right now because the Demogorgon had trapped him in the Vale of Shadows—or a place like it. But the victim of the lab, the one in the woods, they could walk to Benny's. They could go in the back door to the kitchen and eat as many French fries or burgers as they wanted.

Ice cream.

Will bet as soon as Benny, who was always fast to serve him and his family a free serving of ice cream any time they came in (usually for a birthday or special occasions since eating out wasn't cheap, Mom said), would give them ice cream. But only in exchange for a name. You couldn't get something without giving something.

Benny would want to know who they were and where they came from—why they were eating food in the kitchen they couldn't pay for.

Would a person born in a lab have a name? No. A number. They were just an experiment to the Bad Men at the lab, so they wouldn't have a name.

Eleven.

It came to him from nowhere really, but it stuck. Eleven. They'd have it tattooed on them, like a serial number printed on the bottom of an action figure. Something to remind them they weren't their own

person.

But they were... They *were* and they were going to show the world.

First, though, they were going to eat French fries and drink Coke and have a burger. Benny wouldn't even know they were special. Some things were best kept as secrets.

3. Chapter 3

Something just wasn't right here...

Something just wasn't right.

It was pouring rain as Craig stomped through the wet, tangling leaves in line with the other men. Some he knew from the bar, others from work... Some he swore he'd never seen in his life. Odd for such a small town. Impostors, he thought. These people were all impostors.

Couldn't let them know he knew, though. He wouldn't let them make a fool of him like that. He was too outnumbered to call them out on this shit—whatever this shit was.

All Craig could do was stomp through the woods calling out Will Byers' name, knowing full well they weren't ever going to find him.

Kid wasn't hiding in some drain pipe or in the weeds. Kid was in his fucking house. Kid broke in, probably looking for Cooper, and now Craig had to figure out what the hell he was supposed to do.

Someone had given it to him good before he got there. He was covered head to toe in welts and scratches and bruises. He was bloody from the nose down. (Craig remembered getting in a whack or two on him when he first found him hiding in his house. What were a couple more bruises going to hurt?) Now, Craig just had to bide his time and think of a way to get rid of him without getting blamed. He didn't kidnap no little boy. He wasn't some dirty freak.

Craig Crick didn't kidnap Lonnie Byers' missing son and he wasn't taking the heat for whatever son of a bitch did. Hell, the man probably did it himself. Boy probably went running his mouth and got himself in a world of trouble for it. Now he was tryna pin it all on Craig.

His damned father probably put him up to it.

Yeah, that made sense. Boy's father roughed him up and needed to pin the blame on someone else. Passed him off to the first fucker he

came across. Maybe Margie was even in on it. Get him suspended from work, get him thrown in fucking jail for abusing some kid that wasn't even his!

Bitch. Bitch. *Bitch.*

Ever plant and twig he trampled, he imagined it was her dumb fucking face. It was all some big conspiracy. It was all some plot set up against him. Margie was in on it. Cooper was in on it. Byers was in on it. The *kid* was in on it.

The kid... Craig would make him confess. Craig would get him to talk. Craig would break every little bone in his little body if that's what it took to make him squeal. But then again, with the work that had already been done on him, a few love taps with the belt would probably do the trick. And Craig would feel no shame in giving him a couple more to drive home that Craig Crick wasn't a man to fuck with.

He stomped through the grass and brush, imagining the belt in his hand.

"Oh, put it down, Craig! Put it down! He's had enough!" Margie was hollering at him, always making things out to be worse than what they were. She was too soft on the fucking boy. She was too soft and it was making him into a girly boy. Craig took worse than a hiding from his father back in the day. Cooper got off easy.

Cooper got off too fucking easy.

That little shit. That fucking *bitch.*

"What are you doing!? What are you doing? What did you do!? What did you do to him!?" Her voice was a scream, so loud and shrill it made Craig's ears hurt. He slapped her one good, but she just wouldn't stop. She screamed and wailed and hollered and griped. Craig popped her on the nose and she still wouldn't take the hint. She wanted the damned neighbors to hear. She wanted the damn town involved. She wanted to make him look like a fool! *"How could you!? How? Why, Craig—Why!? What did you do to my baby!?"*

WHAT DID YOU DO!?

Craig saw bright red. A gush of it.

Margie's head was cracked open. Oh, God. Oh, God—Oh, Christ.

He hadn't meant to do it. He just wanted to shut her up. He'd had to shut her up because Cooper wasn't talking anymore and now he'd gone and started it.

Cooper's face was mangled, puffy—blackened. Where his eyes squinted through the swollen lids of his eyes, they were filmy gray.

Gotta get rid of the body.

Gotta get rid of the bodies...

Bitch had it coming. The bitch had it coming...

And Cooper...

A cold, icy calmness settled inside him—squashing the rage that had been there. Everything in him became silent. All that was scattered slowly coming together.

Gut them. Dump them. Let the scavengers eat the flesh, let the fire pit eat the bones. Bury the ash where no one would look.

The quarry.

The quarry...

They both just ran off.

And the boy?

Craig would put him in the quarry.

() () ()

There was so much noise. The Demogorgon was trilling and snarling and shrieking. Wet sounds came up from the floorboards with the stench. There were cracking sounds, sawing sounds, ripping sounds.

He's disposing of the bodies. He knows he can't keep them here.

Will was so thirsty and so tired, it was hard to keep feeding the fantasy. Even Will the Wise needed provisions to stay strong on a journey. Will didn't know what *he* was supposed to do. There was no way out of the closet. He'd felt every shelf and wall and pushed as hard as he could against the door with no luck. He found cloves of garlic and ate them whole with black olives he'd found in a jar on a higher up shelf. There was another jar of peppers, what looked like hot peppers when Will squinted in the dark to see, but he wasn't ready to rely on those yet. The garlic and olives were bad enough. The brine from the olives did nothing to hydrate him. His body ached and bled and cracked when he moved.

All day he sat curled up in the corner, naked and bloody. Cold and thirsty.

There was no escape from this.

How long would it be before he was the one swinging back and forth from the ceiling, gutted like an animal and forgotten about by the monster even after the stink became too great?

Will tried to block it out, imagining something else—anything else. What if that person, the person who escaped, found Mike?

Wouldn't that be the very best person to be with? Mike?

At school, Mike always stood up for him. He stood up for all their friends as best he could. It wasn't a lot, but it spoke volumes to Will.

Will imagined that Mike and his friends went looking for him. They would trace his route home and search the woods. They wouldn't find him, he was in the Vale of Shadows after all, but they would find Eleven. Mike would never leave someone out in the cold. Not someone barefoot and cold—not someone small like them.

Lucas wouldn't like it. Dustin would have reservations. Mike wouldn't care about any of that, though. Mike would always do what he saw fit, never taking much outside influence into consideration. At his house, warm in his basement, they would offer Eleven dry clothes.

A girl. It'd be better if Eleven were a girl. Mike would be even nicer and maybe, just maybe, it would mean Dustin and Lucas wouldn't be too defensive. They didn't always like when outsiders tried to join the party. Maybe for a girl they wouldn't mind.

They would try to find a way to hide her. Well, Mike would. Lucas, Will thought, wouldn't be so interested in that. Being from a lab meant Eleven would look and act different. She had no Mom to look after her or teachers to help her. She would be...simple. That was the best way Will could think to describe it. She would use simple words and phrases, not say too much. She didn't trust them either. She'd never had a friend, but she'd know she could trust Mike.

Anyone could trust Mike.

Will was starting to doze off imagining it. Lucas would want to get their parents involved and send Eleven away. She would compromise their mission, he thought. She would make it so they'd never find Will. But without her, they never would. She had superpowers and she'd prove it. Then they'd let her stay.

All of a sudden, there were dragging and fumbling sounds. Something was being dragged by the monster, up the stairs and across the floor.

Will stiffened and pressed back hard against the wall, shivering. The pressure hurt his sores, but that was the last of his worries. He was terrified the door would open. Terrified the monster would grab him again and do worse than it already had.

But it didn't... Will heard a door open, dragging, and then the door slammed.

It was silent.

He waited, breaths coming shaky and heavy, but the house stayed silent. He heard the engine of the truck start outside, idling...then fading? The heat in the house kicked on with a loud boom and then that was all Will could hear. He waited and waited, but the door didn't open again.

A chance.

Will got to his feet and started pushing and testing the door of the closet again, finding it to have no more give than before. His eyes had adjusted and he felt less panic and adrenaline now than he had last night... This morning? Yesterday? He didn't know...

Will wouldn't dwell on that now. He needed to try harder this time. He needed to not get distracted by the items of food he could and couldn't eat from inside the small, cramped closet. This time, he felt high and low. He felt behind the bottles, letting them fall and clatter around his feet.

He felt for soft spots, patch work, air vents—anything.

Finally, his hands smoothed across a piece of wood that was different than the slats in the wall. It was a panel low to the floor and half covered by one of the shelves. An old crawlspace that had been built over with the shelving. Too small for a Demogorgon to fit through, but just the right size for a person like Will *if* he could break the shelf that ran across it like a bar.

Kicking it hurt his toes and his fists weren't strong enough. Will set his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut as he began pounding the ball of his heel into the lowest two boards of the shelving. Bottles rattled, spilled, tumbled around his right foot, but he kept slamming down with his left. It hurt, but it didn't matter. He'd been hurt worse and would be if he didn't get out of here *now*.

He kicked and stomped and stomped and slammed until finally, finally the wooden boards both cracked. The top one first, then the lowest. As soon as they'd given, Will dropped to his knees and started yanking until he could pry up the board covering the crawlspace. It was a tunnel to pitch blackness. Will didn't care. He reached in and moved his arm around, feeling a floor and feeling openness on all sides and above. He could get into the wall. He could fit into the wall and *move*. He didn't care where in the house it took him so long as it was out of the Demogorgon's reach. He'd find clothes. He'd find a trash bag to cover himself if he had to, and he'd run. He'd find a door and he'd run.

Will didn't think of the spider webs in the same way he didn't think of the smell. It was there, and he felt them, but what good did

worrying do? He felt grit under his palms and knees. Every now and then felt something tingling, tickling along his skin. Spiders. Roaches. Anything. Something crawled on him and his first yelp of shock, he gave in. Spiders were better than monsters. He needed to crawl. There wasn't enough space to stand. It seemed like it would be, but then there were beams and planks in his way. He'd cracked his head twice before giving up and staying on hands and knees.

Beneath him, the lair. On either side of him, rooms. He felt around trying to find another way out. If there was an in, there had to be an *out*. Pipes blocked his path on the right of the closet where he'd been kept. The left was open, narrow space. It dead ended at a wall that felt cold to the touch. The outside of the home? Will tried to remember what he'd seen of the house before being dragged to the basement, but he'd only seen the kitchen and the basement and this awful closet. He wanted to cry.

He couldn't find the out and he was too afraid he wouldn't have the strength to kick through and make one. Or, if he did, it would lead the monster to him.

He was like a rat in a trap. If the closet was opened, he would be found out. The monster couldn't reach him in the wall, but it'd know where he was. It wouldn't be hard to smoke him out. Will had to go back and see if he could get around the pipes. If they broke, maybe they'd soften things up enough that he could bust through.

The Demogorgon would punch through the wall to get him if it saw where he'd escaped. He had to keep trying until he could get in and out. Make it obvious that he could. Make the monster wonder if he was in the wall or not.

Will slowly inched back the way he came, finding less webs this time but the same amount of grime and grit. He had stinging bites from the spiders. He hoped they weren't poisonous. No one would find him if he died in the walls like that.

The pipes were so thin and formed a web of their own. His weight made them shift and he heard awful sounds when they did—creaking in other places in the walls. What if the other side was just a wall?

He had to try. It'd be the best hiding spot if it was a dead end on the other side. It was a win either way, he told himself. He had to do this, and fast.

Will gulped and forced himself to climb over the pipes, trying his best to put weight on any of them that seemed thicker or seemed stronger. They creaked and groaned and then he was stumbling down onto the grit and nest of cobwebs on the other side. He felt a scattering of legs all over him, and let out a yelp, brushing and scratching at himself. He recoiled and squirmed, realizing there were pipes along his feet that he was stepping on now. Pipes that led the way to the *out*.

Will found it easily and the panel gave with no effort at all. It spat him out under the kitchen sink. There were slats over his head that he could grip and pull that didn't break. He could climb up and follow the pipes that way, too. The Demogorgon couldn't go there. It wasn't even built for people to crawl and follow. It was just a channel for pushing up pipes. Will was just small enough that he could fit if he had to. It would be tight and hard to get back down, but he could *fit*.

For now, though, Will listened and stared at bottles of bleach and tins of Comet. He could hear rain. The heater was still running, but he didn't hear the truck.

Slowly, Will crawled out into the cupboard, remembering where the bottles were in case he needed to scurry back. He scooted them quietly, and pushed just enough against the door to push it open a crack so he could see the kitchen. The light was on, but it was empty. Will took a deep breath and slowly crawled the rest of the way out, staying on hands and knees until he had silently closed the cupboard door behind him.

Run.

He was staring at the door where he'd been dragged in.

His blood was still on the counter and cupboard doors from...

Slowly, Will got to his feet, staying hunkered down to hide from the windows just in case. He needed to find his clothes or something he

could cover himself with. Anything. A blanket, a trash bag, anything. And something to cover his feet. He wouldn't get far like this...

He didn't have much time to prepare, but running out into the cold and the rain naked was as much of a death sentence as getting caught.

Slowly, Will moved further into the house.

The den...

The lair.

There was blood spattered on the floors and walls in the living room. Smears of it and then drops leading to the basement door. Chunks of...something were being picked at by flies. The smell was so thick. Someone died right there...

Will tried not to look as he went further. Not that blanket. Not those shoes. Bloodied, blackened. He couldn't. He *couldn't*.

The silence gave him enough confidence to sneak up the stairs, though he still froze every time the floorboards would creak. There were smears of blood on the walls. The hand rail was split in two. There were holes punched in the drywall that made Will think of his dad when he was angry.

There was more blood in the hallway, but most of it was in the doorway of one of the rooms. Will avoided it and went instead into the first door on the right. It was a sewing room. A craft room. He left the lights off, but he could see the machine over by the window and the spools of thread hanging all over the walls. Nothing there for him. The next door was a bathroom.

Water.

Will turned on the faucet and drank from it, slurping up the cold liquid from his palms while the icy water splashed all over his face. He drank and drank until he felt dizzy from it and was wanting for air. He turned the water a little warmed and rinsed his hands, then splashed it over his face. He was rinsing spiderwebs out of his bangs, off his shoulders and neck. He was soaked from the waist up, but

didn't care. He felt better covered in water. It made the crawling feeling stop, even as the droplets and beads ran down his legs. He lowered the temperature and drank more handfuls of water, then turned off the faucet and dried his hands on a bath towel hanging on the bar. He thought to dry the sink to hide his tracks, but didn't want to waste the time.

The water revived him. It drove him to move just a little faster despite how much it hurt.

The next door he found was a bedroom—the monster's room. It smelled bad. Not like decay, but something almost worse. Will went for the dresser, senses piqued for any noise within the house. If someone came inside while he was drinking water or washing off, he wouldn't have heard. Now he had to make up for lost time.

Will found socks and underwear. Both were too big, but he pulled on the socks regardless—two per foot to make them thicker under his feet, making up for his shoes that were long gone. The pants were too big. Even if he rolled them up, he could fit almost two of himself in each pant leg. Will closed the drawer and scurried to the other furniture in the room. There was a second, smaller dresser packed with women's clothes. Skirts, bras, underwear. Smaller socks. Then, finally, pants. They were still too big, but had a tie-waist that let him pull the draw string and cinch them tighter. They were a little too long, but he just quickly cuffed them.

He was breathing harder and harder as he hurried to get dressed with whatever he could find. He stuffed the pockets of the sweatpants with more socks in case his hands got cold or the one he was wearing got wet. Then he went for the closet and pulled the first sweater he could find off its hanger. It was a woman's striped sweater but he didn't care. The man's were all too big—too much like a dress.

Outside, the rain smashed against the windows of the house and Will grabbed a second shirt. Layers would keep him dry and keep him warm.

Dressed now, he could escape. He could run. He *would* run. He'd make it. Will dared to go over to the window and peer outside. He could see the long driveway leading to the farmhouse. He could see

the trees all around that would give him shelter. He could see that the truck was still gone.

Mom.

Jonathan.

Mike...

He was going to go *home*. He'd *make it* this time. The Demogorgon wouldn't catch him.

Backing away from the window, Will's eyes traced the nightstand beside the bed, landing on a pale, white phone that sat next to the darkened lamp.

He needed to hurry. He knew that. He had to go... But he could call for help. They could trace the call, right? If he called his mom... 911 would want him to stay put and wait for them. But if he called his mom and then ran, they'd trace the call and know who it was that took him, even if he was long gone. And his mom would know he was okay. She would know to keep looking, to keep waiting.

He shouldn't. He needed to hurry... But the longer he stared at the phone, the more compelled he was. Seven numbers. Just press seven buttons. He didn't even have to talk. He could just leave the phone off the receiver and run. She'd have the call traced. The cops would find out.

Will swallowed hard and grabbed for it, dialing the number he had memorized by heart. It hardly rang before his mother's voice flooded his ears.

And at the exact same time, Will realized his mistake.

"*Lonnie!*?" She was talking, asking questions, sounding angry and Will was frozen—staring at the headlights coming up the drive. The truck. His breaths came shakier and shakier.

Run.

Frozen.

Run.

He could feel the monster's hands on him, those long fingers probing...scratching. Hurting.

Run.

"Will!?"

Will set the phone down and ran. He slipped on the stairs going down, thudding harder and harder each time until coming to a stop on the bottom with a low wail. He had enough time to assess that his ankle was hurting, but that was it. He heard the engine of the truck cut off and knew he was almost out of time.

He limped the whole way back to the kitchen, but kept his voice down as he dove back into the cabinet beneath the sink. He was back in his cave inside the wall, straightening up the bottles he'd moved aside when the door opened.

He could hear the monster trilling and chittering as it stepped into the house. The boards creaked under its weight and Will froze. It moved without sensing him, going to the closet where he'd been locked. As it tore through the barrier to get to him, Will was slowly replacing the plank of wood that led into his hiding space. He scurried away from it—back into the cobwebs and spiders until he was close to the knot of pipes. Out of reach. Out of sight.

The Demogorgon roared and slammed its hands and its feet into the walls—shattering glass and splintering wood in the closet. It shrieked and called and roared so loud it made Will's ears ring. It ripped at the crawl space but couldn't fit inside.

If he stayed still, he'd stay alive.

If he stayed quiet, he'd stay safe.

If he was lucky, the monster would think he was smart and got away.